FAMINE EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS NETWORK TECHNOLOGY SUPPORT CONTRACT (FEWS NET TSC)

WORKSPACE COLLABORATION TOOLS: WHITE PAPER

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Introduction

FEWSNET operates in over 20 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, Central America, and Central Asia, with a core team of support staff in Washington, DC. These offices function in different time zones with varying internet capabilities, making real-time collaboration a challenge. To work together, team members must frequently organize meetings across time zones, experiencing scheduling and internet connectivity failures that can prolong, interrupt, and postpone video conferences, Skype calls, and other online meetings. These difficulties challenge FEWSNET's ability to effectively share knowledge, collaborate, and operate efficiently.

Work collaboration tools can help mitigate these challenges. Shared workspaces provide an area online where users can remain up-to-date on various projects regardless of time zone and where they can exchange files, tasks, and ideas at their own pace. Collaboration tools eliminate the need for long email chains, and storing and sharing message threads.   They offer the ability to house all project information in one central location, accessible by others within the team. In this way, such tools promote working together rather than working in silos.

Some FEWSNET situations in which work collaboration tools may be useful include:

- Coordinating disaster relief activities when the IPC is raised. Due to the urgency of disaster situations, real-time information, updates, and communication is essential. Housing this activity in a central location would streamline dialogue, file-sharing, and task management, offering single-point access for quicker coordination and decision-making.

- Remote monitoring by FEWSNET representatives. While remote monitoring affords FEWSNET the ability to operate in additional countries, working remotely creates additional challenges. In such cases it is even more important for FEWSNET representatives to coordinate closely with many partners that are geographically distanced. Collaboration tools can assist remote monitoring by providing a central online work space for information sharing with in-country partners.

- Improving information-sharing between implementing partners. Currently communication between implementing partners most often occurs one-to-one via email and phone rather than many-to-many. Group interactions are limited to quarterly meetings. Collaboration tools provide an excellent opportunity to allow partners to keep track of what others are doing.

We provide an overview of the different tools reviewed, including a quick feature reference chart. We then go on to describe each tool in detail, reviewing the different pros and cons of each system's features. We also provide recommendations on the tools best suited for FEWSNET. Finally, we provide a use case based on real FEWSNET collaboration needs. The use case involves how FEWSNET might use an online collaboration tool to manage contract revisions.

Overview of Collaboration Tools Reviewed

An abundance of collaboration tools exist on the market to assist organizations in working together. To narrow down the options, we combed reviews on collaboration software. The four tools highlighted in this white paper (Basecamp, Huddle, ActiveCollab, and Teambox) appeared consistently in the top rankings.   Table 1 provides a comparative snapshot of the features of each of these tools.

Table 1: Collaboration Tool Product Feature Grid

Product Name	Cost	Security	Cloud-based	File sharing and storage	Collab. writing	Task mgmt.	Time tracking	Online discussions	Calendar	Quick-add	Web & phone conferencing	Customization
Basecamp http://basecamphq.com/	$99/month for 100 projects and 30 GB of storage	256-bit SSL encryption, servers are locked and monitored, daily backup in multiple locations	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	X	X	X
Huddle www.huddle.com	$16.50/user/ month ($9,900 per year for 50 users)	256-bit SSL encryption, restricted physical access to servers, redundant data center	✔	✔	✔	✔	X	✔	✔	X	✔	✔
ActiveCollab www.activecollab.com	$500 for corporate license +$199 a year.	Runs on company's network, can install on a server with SSL for encryption, passwords are SHA1 encrypted	X	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	X	X
TeamBox www.teambox.com	$99/month for 100 projects and 50 GB of storage	256-bit SSL encryption, restricted physical access to servers, redundant data center	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	X	X	X

In the following sections we review each tool in greater detail.

Basecamp Overview

Priced at $99 per month (for 100 projects and 30GB of storage), Basecamp is a cloud-based collaboration tool that is streamlined and simple to use. Features we anticipate will be of importance in FEWSNET collaboration are detailed below.

Dashboard

The dashboard displays a complete calendar of events and milestones related to all of a user's projects (see Figure 1). It includes tabs that navigate the user to 'to do' lists, 'calendar,' and a 'search' function that include information for all the user's projects.

On the right-hand side of the screen, the user can quickly jump to information for a specified project. Finally, at the bottom of the screen, Basecamp displays recent project actions that detail completed projects, upcoming tasks, etc. This bottom screen area is one of the few features of Basecamp that is less user-friendly, as there is a lot of information packed tightly together.
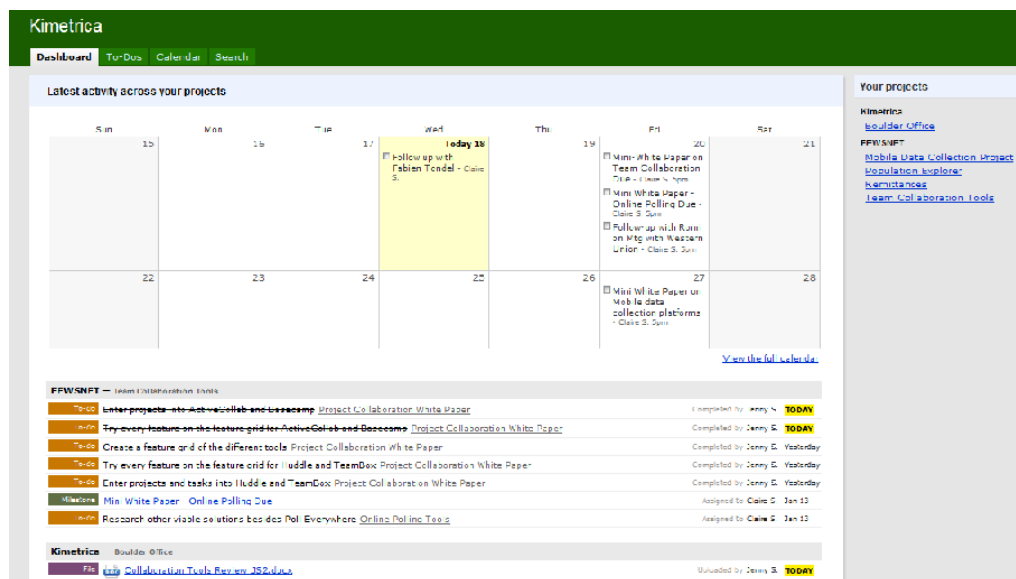

Figure 1 : Basecamp Dashboard

Project Overview

When the user clicks on a specific project, the screen refreshes with the project-specific overview, providing the user with a series on tabs that lead to other functions:

- Messages (email threads)
- To-do lists
- Calendar events
- Write boards (document collaboration)

- Time tracking
- File sharing

From this screen, users can also directly create new messages, to-do lists, events, and files. The page also allows users to turn on email updates and subscribe to the project's RSS feed, and it displays the names of people on the project.
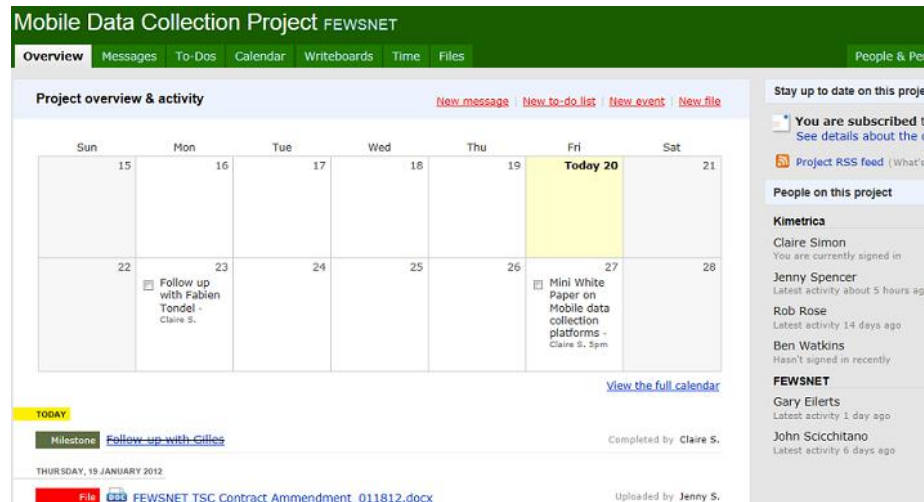

Figure 2: Basecamp Project Overview

Messaging

Figure 3 shows the project messaging feature. Basecamp messages are displayed in full, making it difficult to find the correct discussion when there are many messages posted. That said, Basecamp provides a summary that includes the most active discussions at the top of the page. In addition, on the right-hand side of the page, the system allows the user to view messages by category.
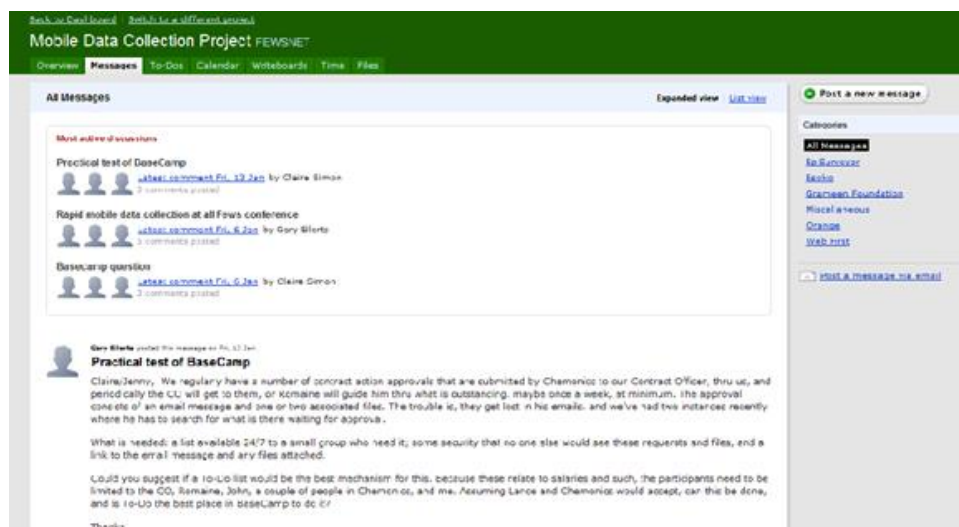

Figure 3: Basecamp Project Messaging

Tasks

Basecamp's "To-do" section is extremely useful and user-friendly. Users can make multiple to-do lists, comment on each item, and filter by responsible person or due date.
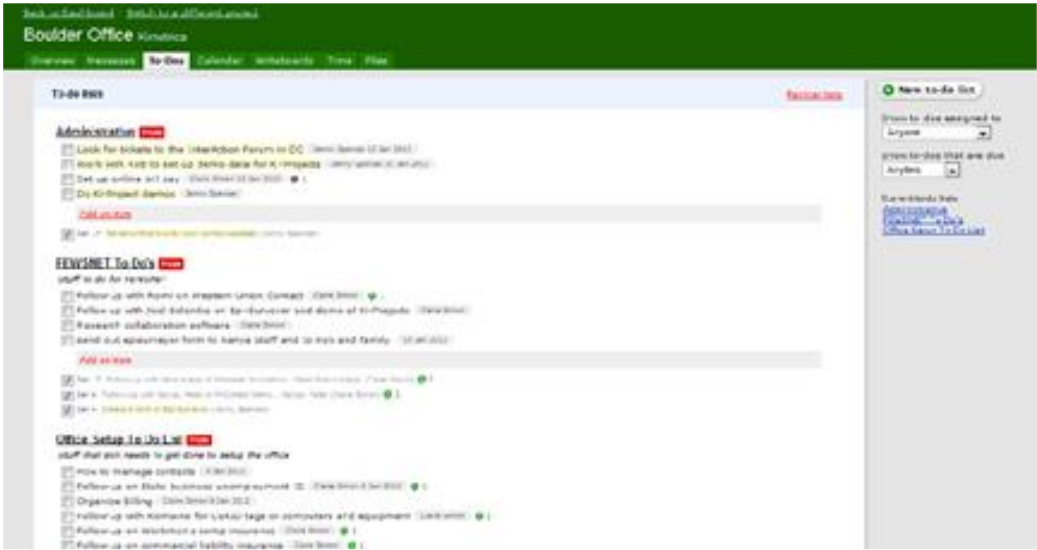

Figure 4: Basecamp To-do lists

Calendar

The Basecamp calendar function is also useful. Users can create new items simply by double-clicking on a given day. Each project calendar displays events and milestones but not task due dates.
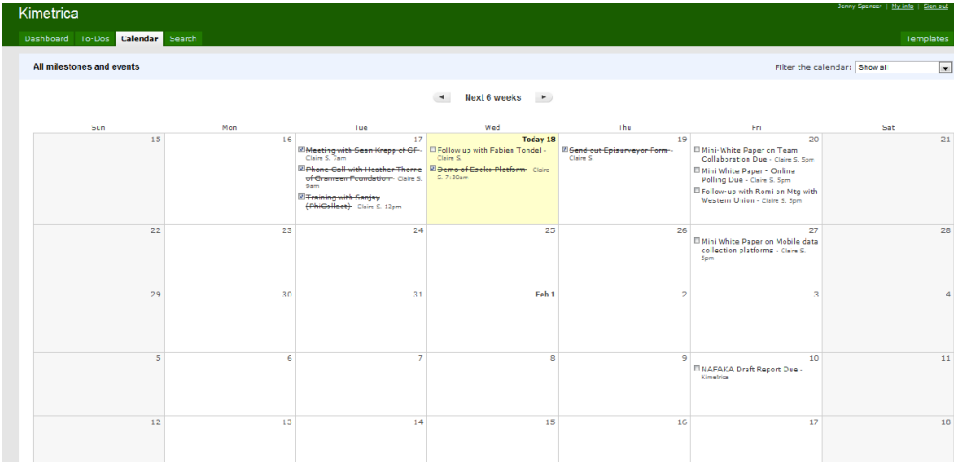

Figure 5: Basecamp Calendar

Other Features

The other features of Basecamp include Writeboards, time tracking, and file-sharing. Writeboards, Basecamp's version of basic collaborative writing, has a form of versioning but doesn't allow for detailed formatting. The time tracking function is quite simplistic. Time tracking consists of a simple log, but can also be tracked by to-do list. Finally, while files can be saved with versioning, users cannot create folders and sub-folders for the files. This could be an impediment if users plan to use the system primarily for file-sharing.

Overall, we really liked the look and feel of Basecamp. It is intuitive, easy to use, and contains useful navigation and features.

Huddle Overview

Huddle is by far the most expensive of the tools reviewed ($16.50 per user per month for 50 users, $14 per user per month for 100 users). The company justifies the price by offering extensive training and back-end support. Huddle is a cloud-based system that provides web and phone conferencing, as well as customization of the site's appearance.

Dashboard

The Huddle dashboard is content-heavy but clean, displaying a 2-week calendar including task deadlines and meetings (although the calendar is un-editable from the dashboard view). The dashboard also includes highlights, notifications, recent updates, and visual displays of progress in each workspace (project), as well as lists of files awaiting approval, tasks, and files the user is working on (that are locked for editing).
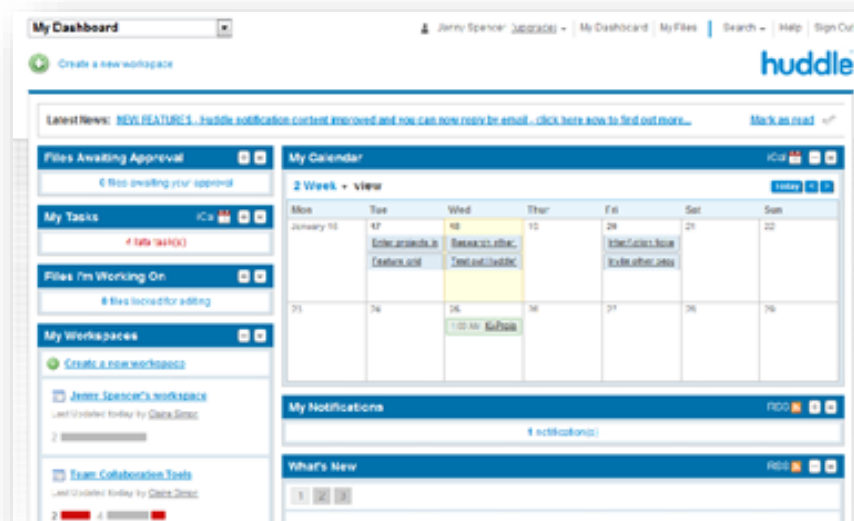

Figure 6: Huddle Dashboard

Project Overview

Each workspace contains an overview page which hosts the project's calendar and recent updates. Similar to Basecamp, in the workspace (or project in Basecamp terminology), the system provides tabs to other features:

- Whiteboards
- Tasks
- Discussions
- Files
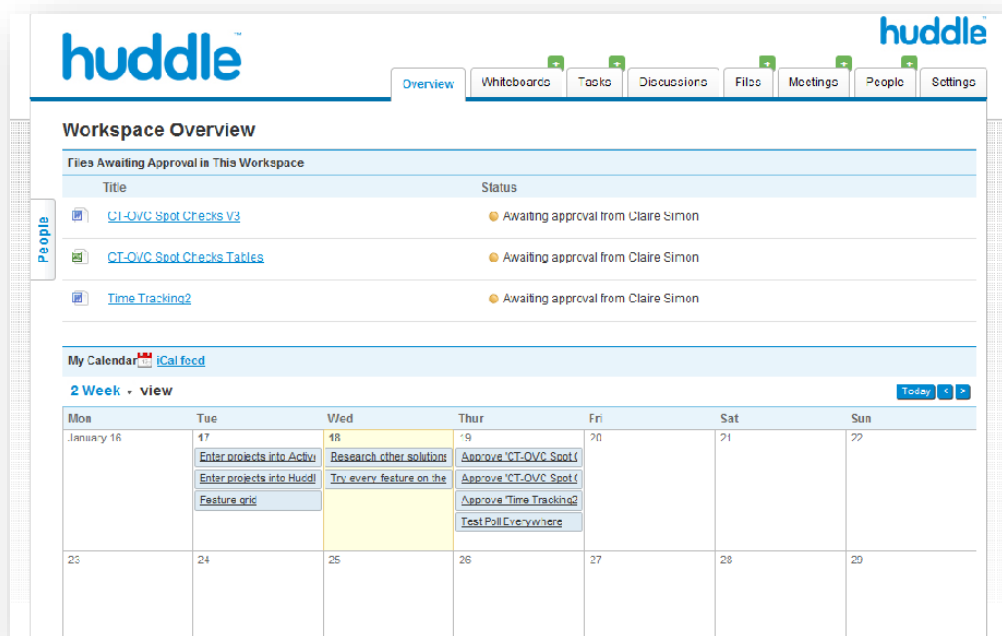- Meetings
- People
- Settings

Figure 7: Huddle Workspace Overview

Messaging

Within Huddle, the discussions page displays messages by title, making it easy to see many discussion topics without having to scroll and wade through text. The page also shows which user created each discussion when, and it lists the name of the user that added the most recent post and when it was added.

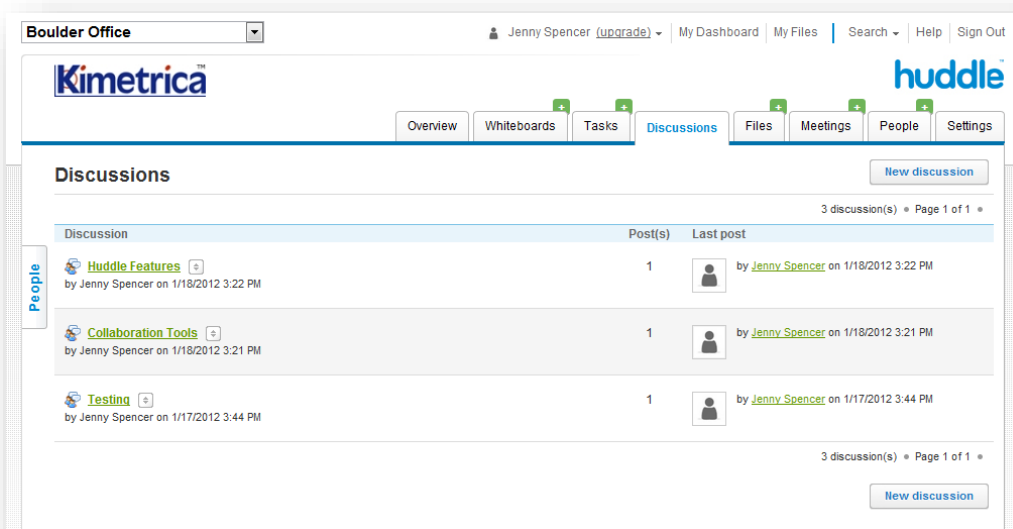Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET TSC)

Figure 8: Huddle Discussions

Tasks

The task function in Huddle is useful, as users can color-code tasks by status and can sort by status, person responsible, and due date. However, it is not possible to create multiple to-do lists per workspace, and the page itself is very busy (see Figure 9).
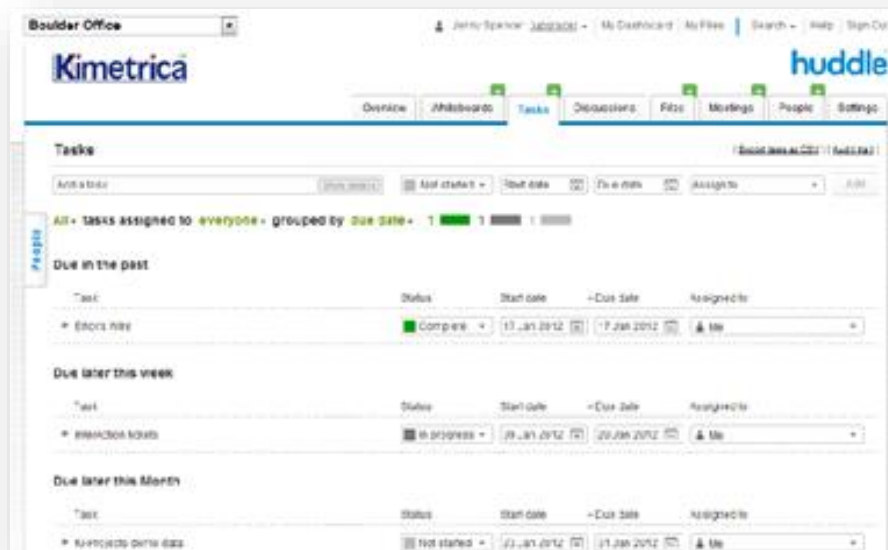

Figure 9: Huddle Tasks

Calendar

Unfortunately, the calendar cannot be directly updated. Rather, it is modified via the creation of tasks and meetings on other tabs. The calendar for each project appears only on the Project Overview screen (see Figure 7). Once there, the user can choose to view a 2-week or monthly calendar.

Other Features

Huddle's best feature is its capacity to share, store, and organize files. The sub-folder structure works very well and is intuitive, similar to storing files on an individual's own desktop. Users can create MS Office documents online, upload zipped files, and email files directly from the Files tab.

Users can host web and phone conferences via Huddle, although there is an additional fee. Finally, Writeboards provide a simple collaborative writing tool with versioning and an audit trail. While Huddle offers a number of functions, it offers the option to turn features on and off to suit the needs of each workspace.

We liked Huddle in its thoughtful organization of tools and tasks, especially its dashboard. It is clean and easy to read. The primary barrier with Huddle is the high price. It is not clear that this price is justified for what FEWSNET needs.

ActiveCollab Overview

At $500 for a corporate license plus $199 per year, ActiveCollab is inexpensive compared to the other tools reviewed. The primary difference between ActiveCollab and its competitors is that it must be locally hosted. As such, the cost saved in licensing can easily be used up in website hosting and maintenance. We decided to include ActiveCollab in our analysis because it is well-regarded, and certain FEWSNET partners may have issues with the security of cloud-based solutions.

Dashboard

Compared to the other tools reviewed, ActiveCollab's dashboard is not extremely useful: it displays the user's favorite projects, a list of which users have recently been online, and two tabs for viewing either recent activities across all projects, or a list of active projects (see Figure 10).   Constant on every screen (and accessible from the dashboard), users can navigate to their calendar, their assignments (tasks), a search feature, a list of starred items, a trash can, and, one of the most unique and useful features, a quick-add function. With quick-add, a user is able to add a milestone, discussion, file, page (collaborative document), ticket (to-do category), or time record to any of their projects from any page without navigating to the proper screen.
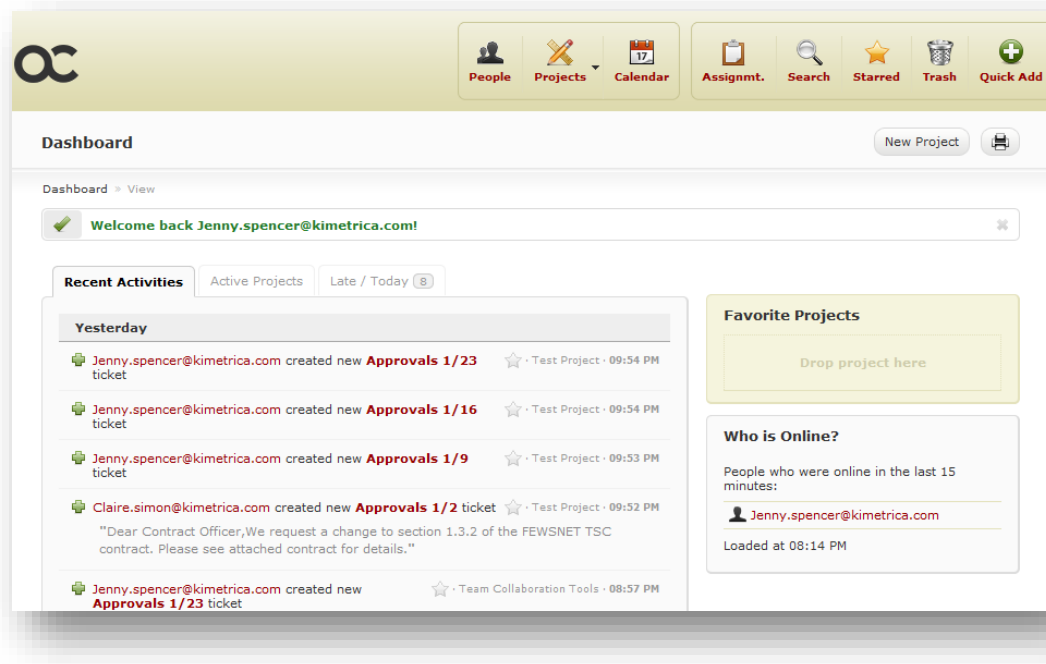
Figure 10: ActiveCollab Dashboard

Project Overview

Each ActiveCollab project has its own dashboard, which is slightly more useful than the main dashboard. It visually displays the progress of the project (based on the number of tasks completed), lists upcoming milestones, shows the people on the project, and provides a list of recent activities. Again, similar to other tools, from there the user can access several features:

- Milestones
- Discussions
- Files
- Calendars
- Pages (similar to whiteboards)
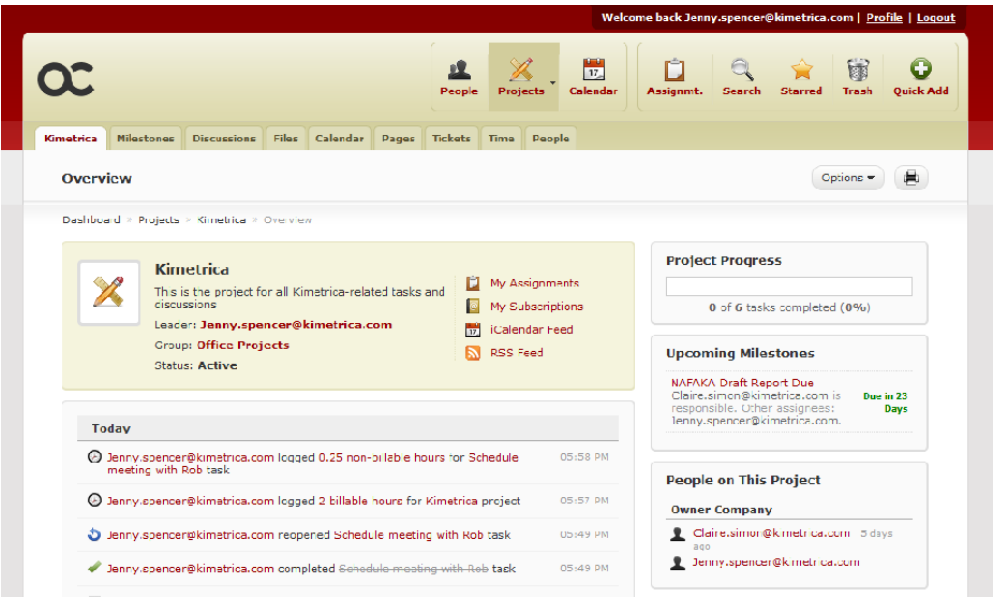- Tickets (tasks)
- Time
- People

Figure 11: ActiveCollab Project Overview

Messaging

Project discussions, ActiveCollabs, and terminology for messaging are displayed by title, making it easy to see many discussion topics without having to scroll and wade through text. Users can mark the level of priority, tag, and select to receive emails and reminders for each milestone, discussion, page, and ticket and they can subscribe or unsubscribe to each at any time. Discussions, files, pages, and tickets can be sorted into categories and associated with milestones.
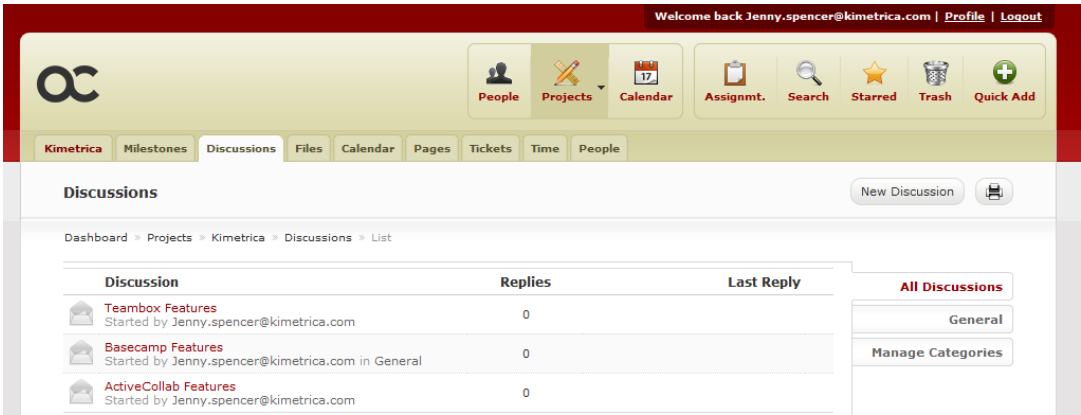

Figure 12: ActiveCollab Discussions

Tasks

Another of the unique features in ActiveCollab is its task management system, consisting of "tickets" which effectively serve as project to-do lists with the ability to assign responsibility and due dates. Within each ticket, users can create specific tasks to which they can add responsible parties, due dates, and stars for important tasks. While tickets and tasks cannot be filtered, users can view all tickets and tasks assigned to them under the "assignment" button in the navigation section of each screen (see Figure 13).

Figure 13: ActiveCollab Assignments

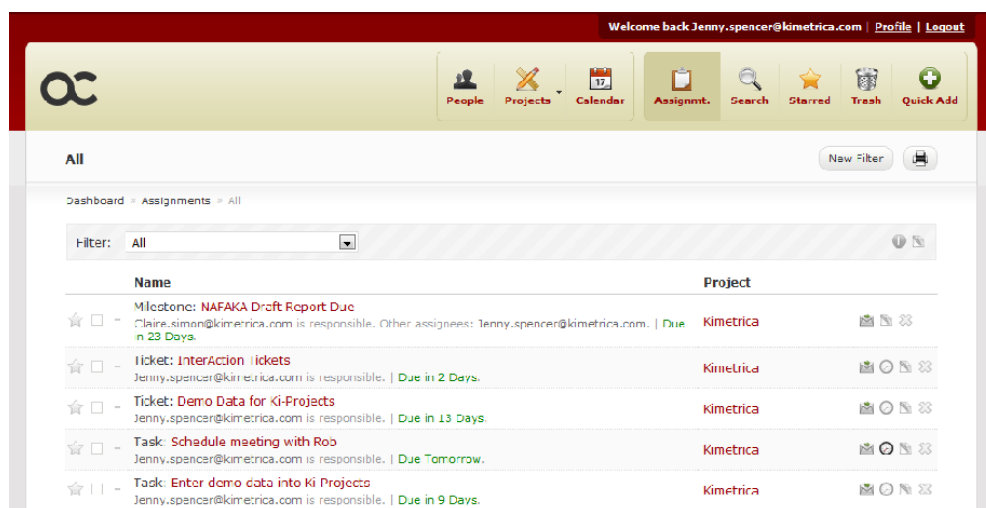# Calendar

Unlike the calendar in Basecamp, the ActiveCollab calendar cannot be edited directly; it must be modified by adding tasks, tickets, and/or milestones. This can, however, be done relatively easily with the quick-add feature. The calendar shows all task, ticket, and milestone due dates, but does not allow the creation of events, like in Basecamp.
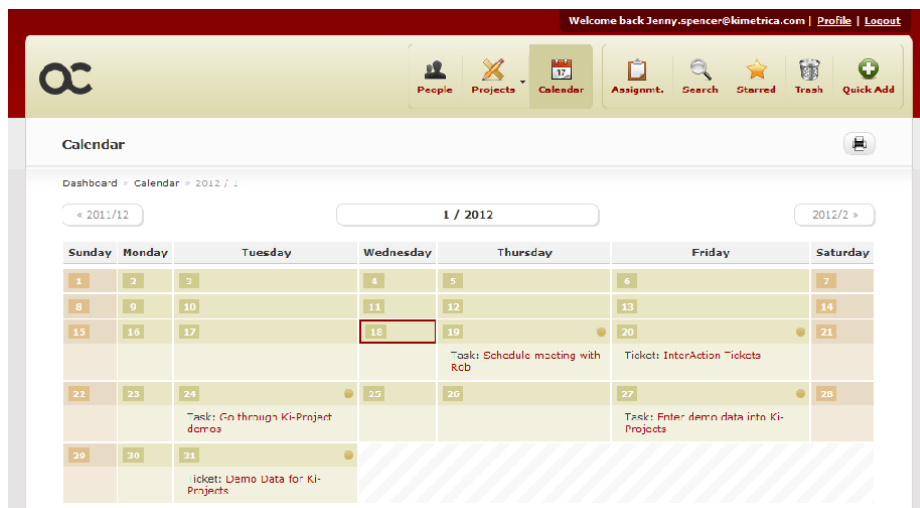

Figure 14: ActiveCollab Calendar

Other Features

Regarding other features of ActiveCollab, file organization is not very intuitive, as they must be organized via categorization rather than by creating folders and sub-folders. File uploads do, however, have versioning, and users can prioritize, tag, and comment on each file.

"Pages" is ActiveCollab's version of a collaborative writing tool. It is fairly simplistic in its usability. Similarly, while the time tracking function is not incredibly robust, users can associate their time with specific tasks and tickets or manually in each project. This allows users to track their time at various levels, allowing flexibility but requiring the company to set and train users on the protocols of time tracking it wishes to use.

ActiveCollab has many interesting features, but nothing from a usability standpoint that really makes it stand out from its competitors. That said, if onsite hosting is a requirement, ActiveCollab is the tool of choice.

Teambox Overview

Teambox is a cloud-based system that specializes in creating a hybrid between online collaboration and social networking tools. It costs $99 per month for 100 projects and 50 GB of storage.

Dashboard

The Teambox dashboard is similar to the Facebook home page, with a text box for status updates to indicate what the user is working on and a list of recent project updates. The navigation bar on the right-hand side remains constant on all pages with links to recent activity, projects with the ability to maximize a list of components of each project, tasks due today, all tasks assigned to the user, organizations the user is affiliated with, and time tracking.
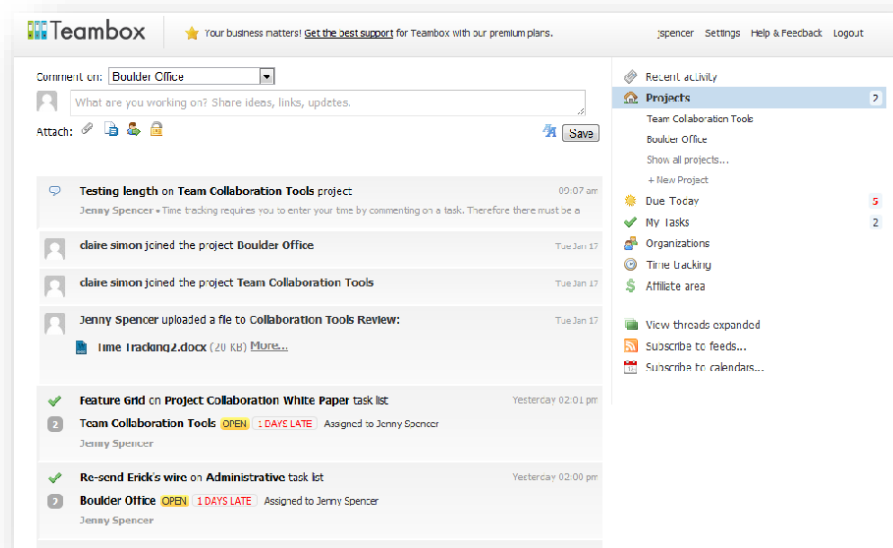

Figure 15: Teambox Dashboard

Project Overview

Teambox is the only tool that we evaluated that does not feature a specific type of project overview and does not use tab format for navigation. Rather, users access all project information from a right-hand navigation bar that collapses and expands to show the tools for each project. Like the other tools, it provides features such as:

- Recent activity
- Conversations
- Tasks
- Time tracking
- Pages
- Files

Unlike the other tools reviewed, Teambox does not have easily-accessible navigation to the Calendar.

Messaging

The messaging feature, called conversations in Teambox terminology, displays messages in full, making it difficult to find the correct discussion when there are many messages posted. Users can subscribe ("watching") or unsubscribe to messages at any time.
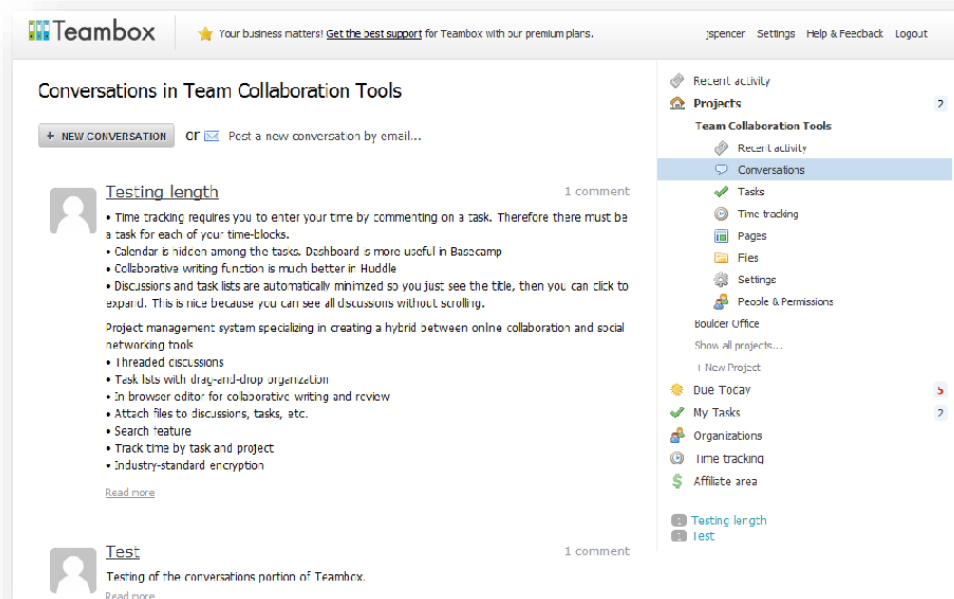

Figure 15: **Teambox Conversations**

Tasks

The Teambox task feature allows multiple to-do lists. It color-codes each task according to various types of task status which can be useful but seems to clutter the screen. Tasks are displayed by title, due date, and person assigned, and users can click to expand and see all comments and progress on the task.
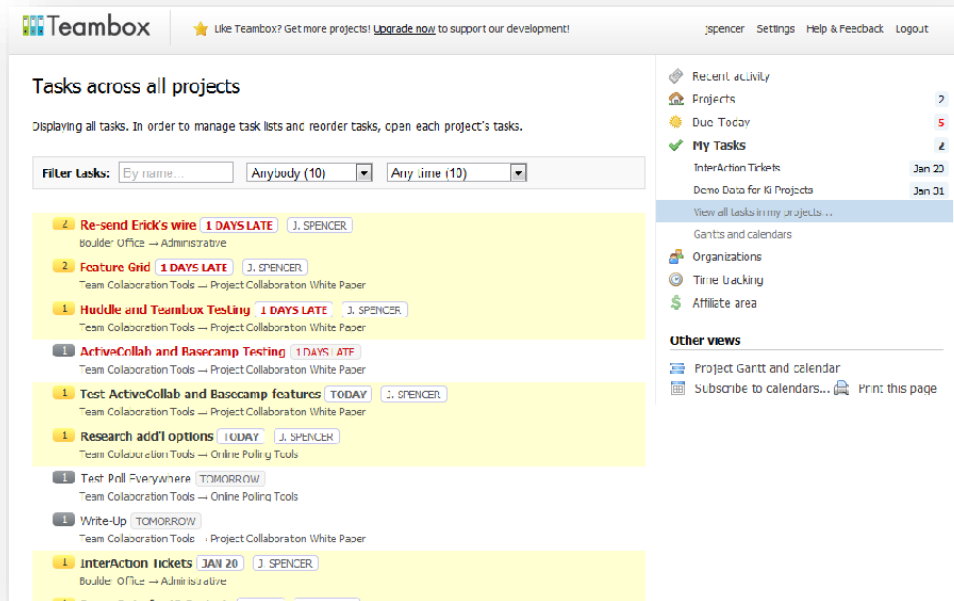

Figure 17: Teambox Tasks

Tasks can be filtered by name, person responsible, and due date.

Calendar

As previously mentioned, the calendar is difficult to navigate. The calendar feature is not user-friendly in that when users hover over any task in the calendar, large informative bubbles inhibit the view. The Teambox calendar only displays tasks, not meetings.
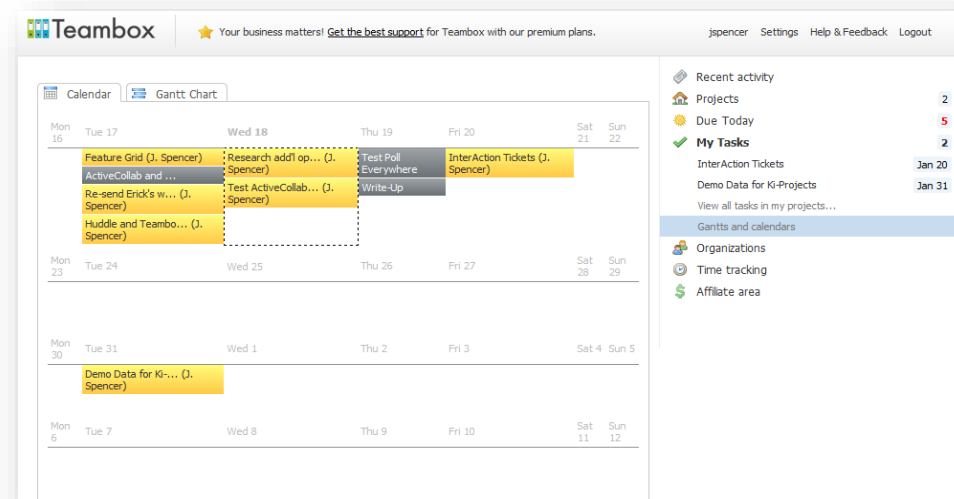
Figure 18: Teambox Calendar

Other Features

Many of the additional features of Teambox are mediocre at best. Time tracking is not intuitive or streamlined. Since manual entry is not available, users must instead track their time by commenting on tasks. Therefore, a task must either pre-exist or be created for each time block. Similarly, the collaborative writing function is simplistic; it does not have versioning or an audit history. One of the better features of Timebox is the file storage system. It consists of a user-friendly folder and sub-folder structure, much like users work with on their desktops.

While Teambox has many of the same functions as the other tools we reviewed, they are not as fully developed. General usability is also lacking in comparison to its competitors.

Recommendations

Overall, we believe that Basecamp and ActiveCollab are the best two collaboration tools for use by FEWSNET. Between the two, Basecamp has a better dashboard, more intuitive and overall streamlined organization, and the ability to add tasks and milestones directly into the calendar and to filter tasks. On the other hand, ActiveCollab has an easier-to-use discussion page, a quick-add feature, the ability to see tasks on the calendar, more robust time tracking, better categorization, and overall has more integrated features. More detailed permissions are possible, and it is slightly less expensive. Both tools have useful but different task management systems; the collaborative writing features are roughly equivalent. Neither has a great system for file management in terms of creating folders and sub-folders; files can only be categorized at a basic level.

The primary difference that should inform FEWSNET's decision between these two tools is that Basecamp is cloud-based, while ActiveCollab must be hosted by FEWSNET. While hosting a collaboration

tool may be beneficial in terms of firewalls, it creates challenges in terms of system maintenance and security and may add additional cost.

Despite its useful file storage system, Teambox seems to have the least intuitive functionality, particularly in terms of the calendar, a feature we assume would be key in situations in which FEWSNET would utilize a collaboration tool. Compared to the other tools reviewed, Teambox screens are busy and the features in general are not as fully developed.

Huddle, although its dashboard and file storage system are the most useful, is exorbitantly priced in comparison with the other tools reviewed (eight times the cost of Teambox and Basecamp). We do not find that the features and the back-end support would be worth the cost.

Use Case

FEWSNET regularly has a number of contract action approvals that are submitted by Chemonics to the FEWSNET Contract Officer. The approval consists of an email message and one or two associated files. These often get lost in the Contract Officer's emails. A work collaboration tool could solve this problem by offering the list of approvals and attached files in a secure central location. The screenshots and descriptions on the following pages demonstrate how this can be done in both Basecamp and ActiveCollab.
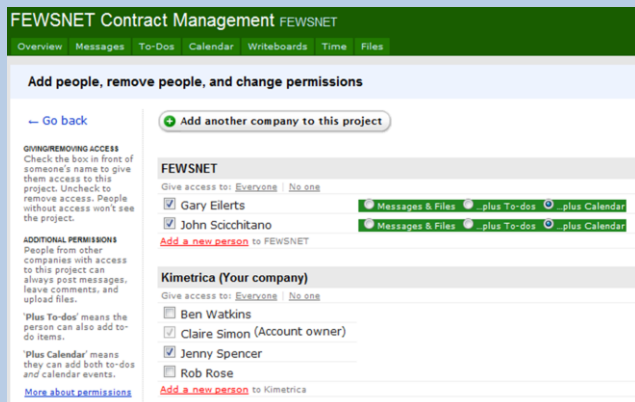
Basecamp

To create a private project for the approvals in Basecamp, the company administrator will first need to create a new project. We have entitled this project "FEWSNET Contract Management."

The administrator will then go to the People & Permissions tab to restrict access to only those individuals necessary for the project (left). For this project, only Gary Eilerts and John Scicchitano from FEWSNET and Jenny Spencer from Kimetrica (and Claire Simon since she is the system administrator) have permissions to access the project.

To create a list for approvals, the user will go to the To-Dos tab and create a new To-do list. We have titled the list (above) "Approvals." By clicking Add an Item, users can easily add new approvals by simply typing the new title into the dialogue box and assigning a responsible party (the Contract Officer) and due date. When the Contract Officer has completed each action approval, he/she can simply click in the checkbox to it cross off and it will be moved to the bottom of the list.
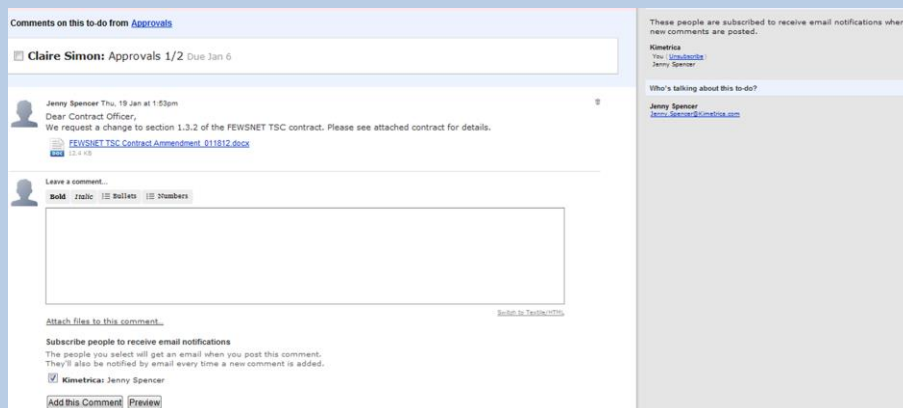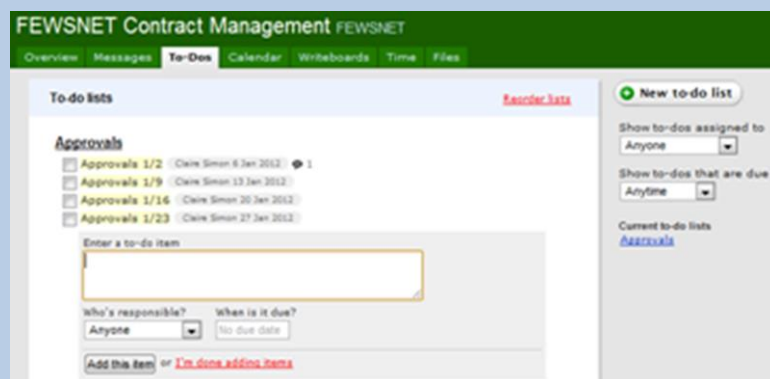
To add the text and files that are usually sent via email, the user must comment on the appropriate task or approval, commenting on each task, as has been done for "Approvals 1/2" (see comment bubble above and comment screen to the left). The text can be entered directly into the comment field and the file can be attached. The user can then select whether to send each individual an alert.

Once the text and files are added to the comment, the file will also be available under the Files tab. If necessary, users can upload a new version of the files to this section and they will be automatically updated in the To-Dos list. Basecamp keeps track of all versions that are uploaded, and users can download any old versions.
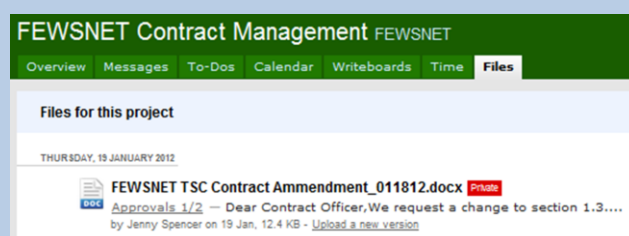
ActiveCollab

To create a private project for the contract action approvals in ActiveCollab, a user (not necessarily the system administrator) must create a new project. We have entitled this project "Test Project."

By clicking on the People tab, then Add People, the Project Leader can add users and select which features they can access, create, and manage. For this project, we restricted all users from accessing Milestones, Discussions, Pages, and Time Records in order to streamline usability and to turn off features that will not be used for the project.

To create a list for approvals, the user will create a new Ticket in the Tickets tab (or via the quick-add function). Here, users simply enter a summary or title (we used "Approvals 1/2"), paste the content that is usually emailed, attach a file, assign a responsible party, and assign a category. Users can also select an associated milestone, priority, and tags, if desired.

Once tickets are added, they can be sorted by category (see right-hand side of screen shot). The level of priority assigned is listed to the left-hand side of each ticket. Users can also star important tickets. By clicking on a given ticket, users can elect to send reminders to themselves or others, subscribe, and add comments.

Files uploaded to the tickets can be viewed by clicking on the File tab, then on the All Attachments category.

Annex

Tools Review Chart

Company	Description	Comments
Basecamp basecamphq.com	**Project management software that provides shared workspaces** • Message Boards: Keep all the discussions about a project in one centralized location. • File sharing and storage: • To Do Lists • Time Tracking • Writeboard: word-sharing/tracking • Calendaring	• Discussion board posts most active discussions at top to minimize scrolling to find popular messages. Posts are also combined into categories listed at right. • Screens are streamlined and simple. • Each version of a file is stored and is easily accessible, but users cannot create folders or sub-folders for the files. • Useful to-do section. Can sort by person and due date. • Time tracking is not robust – mainly just a log. • Collaborative writing function is better in Huddle. • Simple to create milestones and events in calendar, displays on dashboard. • Calendar does not show task due dates. • The list of new updates on the dashboard is cluttered.
Huddle www.huddle.com	**Project management and file-sharing software** • Online file storage with folder and sub-folder structure. • File viewer and editor – edits Word and Excel files in the browser – with full version history and audit trails. • Discussions and comments • Calendaring • Phone and web conferencing • Task management with auto-reminders • Permissions for folders, encrypted data • Site branding including skins and a custom URL	• Cannot create multiple to-do lists per project; task page is busy, but users can color-code task statuses. • Dashboard displays calendar, notifications, files awaiting approval, tasks, files you're working on, and your work spaces. The best dashboard, although users cannot edit the calendar from the dashboard or project overview tabs – they must go through the meeting tab. • Calendar displays tasks and meetings. • File sharing, collaboration, and storage is good. Sub-folder structure works well • Users must pay to use Huddle phone conferencing. • Ability to turn features on and off for simplicity. • Discussions page minimizes the details, displaying only the title, who created it, when it was created, and number of posts. Then you click to expand. Makes it easy to see many discussions without having to scroll and wade through text.
ActiveCollab www.activecollab.com	**Server NOT cloud-based – good for firewalls bad for maintenance** • Multiple project creation and	**Pricing: $500 for corporate license +$199 a year.** • Cannot create sub-projects , but users can create multiple projects and categorize them by client or group

	management • File upload capability • Task management (called tickets) • Detailed time tracking • Invoicing • Online discussions • To-do lists • Collaborative writing	• To-do's are divided into larger tickets with smaller associated tasks, assign users to tickets and tasks. Visually displays project progress in terms of number of to-do's completed. • Users can add reminders to each discussion and milestone and subscribe/ unsubscribe at any time. • Categorize and tag files for organization, download new and old file versions. • Cannot directly add milestones and events into calendar, but displays tasks on their due dates. • Discussions page minimizes details, so users can see many discussions without having to scroll and wade through text. • Time tracking is a log that can track billable and non-billable. Can enter time via ticket, sub-tasks, or manually in the project – possibly too many ways to enter time, but may be useful as then users can track it by tickets and to-do's. • Quick-add is great – add a milestone, discussion, file, page, ticket, or time record to any project from any page, without navigating to the proper screen.
TeamBox	**Specializes in creating a hybrid between online collaboration and social networking tools** • Threaded discussions • Task lists with drag-and-drop organization • In-browser editor for collaborative writing and review • Attach files to discussions, tasks, etc. • Search feature • Track time by task and project • Industry-standard encryption • Calendar	• Time tracking requires users to enter time by commenting on a task. Therefore there must be a task for each time-block. • Calendar is hidden among the tasks and large bubbles of detail inhibit the view when hovering over any task. Cannot schedule meetings, just tasks. • Dashboard is not incredibly useful. • Collaborative writing function is much better in Huddle. • Screens seem quite busy, especially in to-do section (though users can filter tasks by person, due date, and name). • File storage: can create folders and sub-folders.